DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 755 CE 065 007

AUTHOR Breen, Mary, Ed.
TITLE Women, Literacy and Action: A Handbook.
INSTITUTION Ontario Literacy Coalition, Toronto.
SPONS AGENCY National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE Feb 91
NOTE 69p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Collected Works - General (020)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Disadvantaged; Displaced Homemakers; Females; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; *Literacy Education; Nontraditional Students; Sex Bias; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Fairness; *Teaching Methods; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS International Womens Year; Ontario

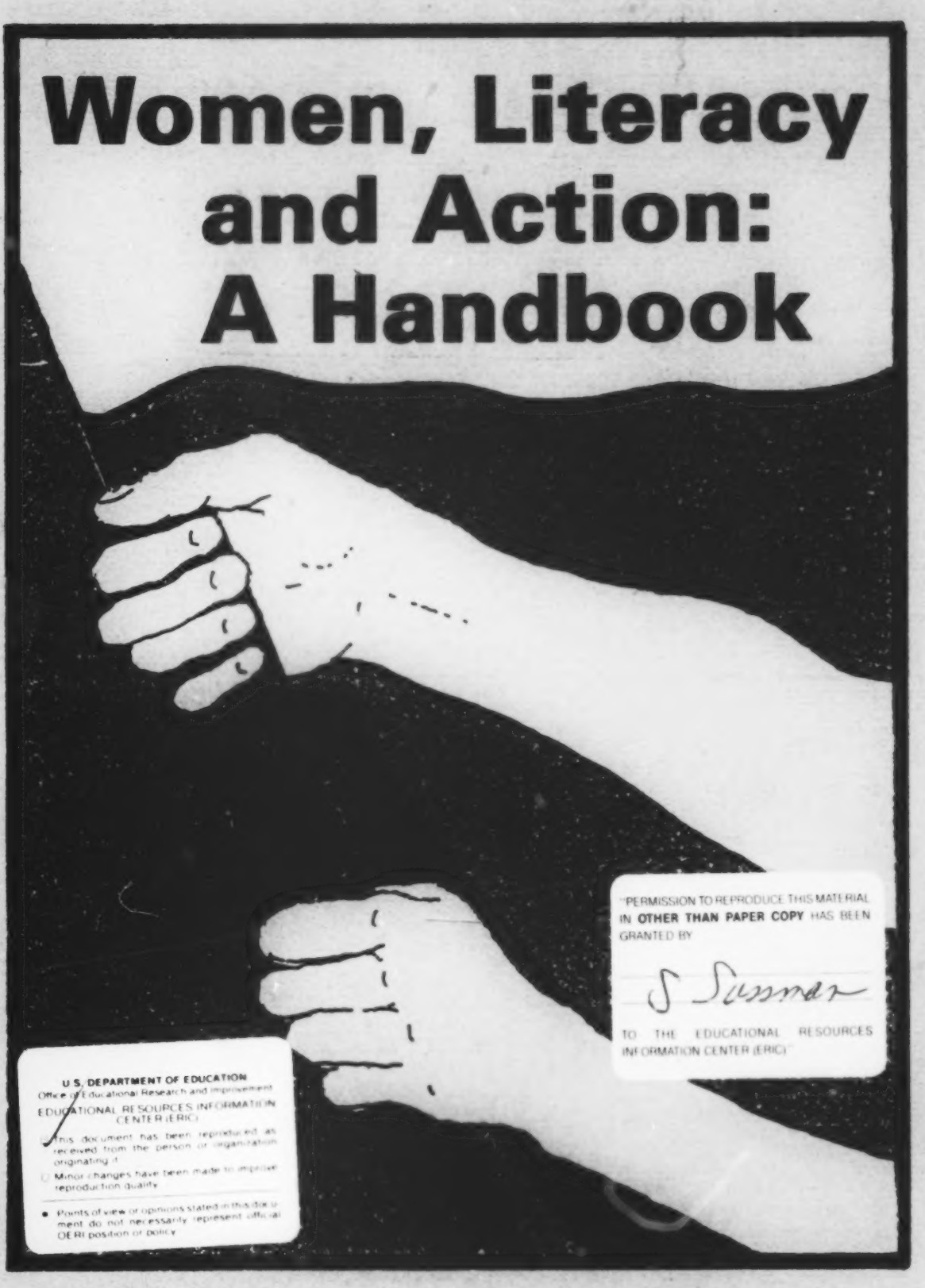
ABSTRACT

This handbook, to be used in literacy instruction programs, particularly with women, contains six articles concerning women and literacy written by women in Ontario. The articles are the following: "Feminism and Literacy" (Naomi Garber, Jenny Horsman, and Tracy Westell); "Looking at 'Ism's': Visible Minority Women and Literacy" (an interview with Nancy Simms); "Women and Health and Literacy" (Mary J. Breen); "Native Women in Literacy" (Florence Gray); "Parenting and Literacy" (Barbara Flint-Coplan); and "Women, Literacy and Poverty: Making the Connections" (an interview with Wendy Desbrisay). The handbook also contains suggestions for activities for International Women's Day for literacy programs and a section of resources listing 3 groups and 34 printed materials. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 363 755

Women, Literacy and Action: A Handbook



"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN **OTHER THAN PAPER COPY** HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Sussman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CE 065007

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Women, Literacy and Action:
A Handbook

Published by
Ontario Literacy Coalition
365 Bloor Street East
Suite #1003
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 3L4
(416) 963-5787

February 1991

Acknowledgements

The Ontario Literacy Coalition would like to acknowledge the National Literacy Secretariat, Department of the Secretary of State for funding this project. We also thank the staff there for a great deal of support.

We wish to thank Michael Clark of Montana Desktop Designs and Annette Hegel of Crazy Chameleon Graphics for their design work on this publication. Ann Decter's assistance in editing the text is also much appreciated.

Most important are the women who devoted so much volunteer time and effort to discussing and writing down their ideas. They are:

Dharini Abeysekera
Pramila Aggarwal
Christine Almeida
Mary J. Breen
Wendy Desbrisay
Barbara Flint-Coplan
Kathe Forneri
Naomi Garber
Florence Gray
Jenny Horsman
Maxine MacKenzie
Nancy Simms
Gladys Watson
Tracy Westell

Co-ordination and editing were done by Mary Breen, Project Co-ordinator, Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Please note: Mary Breen of the OLC, Toronto, and Mary J. Breen of Peterborough are in fact two different people.

Contents

1 About this Book 1

2 Articles 6

Feminism and Literacy 6
Naomi Garber, Jenny Horsman and Tracy Westell

Looking at "Ism's": Visible Minority Women and Literacy 22
An Interview with Nancy Simms

Women and Health and Literacy 31
Mary J. Breen

Native Women in Literacy 35
A Letter from Florence Gray

Parenting and Literacy 38
Barbara Flint-Coplan

Women, Literacy and Poverty: Making the Connections 43
An Interview with Wendy Desbrisay

3 International Women's Day Activities for Literacy Programs 55

4 Resources 60

1
About this Book

Where this book began

In 1988, members of the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) began expressing an interest in making women and literacy the focus of a project. This idea couldn't be followed through immediately, but in the summer of 1990, with an International Literacy Year grant from the National Literacy Secretariat, this handbook was conceived.

Originally, this project was modest in scope. The idea was to gather women involved in literacy in Ontario together, and to publish their thoughts on themes relating to women and literacy in the OLC newsletter, *Literacy on the Move*. From there, the project grew. We decided that a wider audience in both literacy and the women's movement could be reached if the articles were expanded in scope, and compiled into a published collection.

It also seemed that a natural link could be made with International Women's Day. Since programs were going to have articles on women and literacy in hand, it only made sense to offer suggestions for using these and other resources during the activities and celebrations that surround March 8. Few communities in Ontario observe International Women's Day, or have organized forums for bringing women from different areas of work and interest together. The women involved in the writing of this book, and the OLC Board of Directors, agreed that the experiences of those of us who have been thinking and working toward linking women's issues with literacy should be shared with programs. As a result, this book contains suggestions for literacy programs interested in planning IWD activities.

The last section in this book is a resource listing. A significant amount of work is currently being done in the area of women and literacy. Women's voices are rising, and projects and materials are coming out of the literacy movement across Canada. There is much more to do, particularly in terms of women-positive programming and curriculum development, but some first steps have been taken. The Ontario Literacy Coalition is pleased to be involved in this move forward for all women working and learning in the literacy field.

How this book was developed

To write about the process of producing this book requires stepping out of the anonymous co-ordinator/editor role, and introducing my own voice into the text. I am now writing from the individual perspective of Mary Breen.

I struggled with the process of soliciting, compiling and editing this book, because these acts had everything to do with its content. By this, I mean that I had to ask women to write about things that affect them directly. And the way they managed their participation tended to underline the truth about what they were writing. For example, to get this publication out under the terms of the grant, I had to juggle my budget and try to strike a balance among what I could afford to pay people in the form of honoraria, the remuneration that their efforts deserved, how much volunteer labour I in fact had to count on to see this project through, and how much blood and sweat I could bear to demand of the women involved.

Poverty is an underlying theme in the articles printed here. The pieces "Women, Literacy and Poverty" and "Parenting and Literacy" in particular bring home the point that women continue to be ghettoized in unpaid or underpaid work, often in the "caring" professions. Yet I found myself asking for hours of work for which I could only symbolically compensate people, by paying them an honorarium that might even be construed as insulting.

Given the workloads of the women who agreed to participate, I also knew that the bulk of the thinking, talking and writing that would go into this project would take place after work. This meant taking time away from children in many cases, and probably paying for childcare in some. As a woman trying to

cope with the double duties of work and family, I felt more than a twinge of guilt about the situation I was creating for my co-mothers. At the same time, I felt anger (albeit misplaced) toward the women I knew were childless and therefore free to get together whenever they wanted to talk at length about the content of their pieces. I felt the way I imagine many feminist mums feel sometimes - frustrated that I was missing out on the advancement of the women's movement - *my* movement - because I was busy living out the dichotomies that still exist for those of us who take on reproductive work on top of the other important paid work we are engaged in.

Further, my self-esteem entered the process. An ingrained fear of inadequacy plagued me at several points along the way. This mirrors the argument made in several of the articles that low self-esteem is one of the biggest barriers women face. It negatively impacts on learning, and can be one of the stumbling blocks women literacy workers face in trying to do too many things for too many people in too little time. Also, like many of us who are involved in research, writing, or projects of one kind or another, I was acutely conscious of my need to placate, facilitate and mediate in order to please my collegues and my prospective audience.

I found myself modifying my requirements as co-ordinator of the project, rescheduling meetings, and extending deadlines all over the place. This flexibility might have been in keeping with my ideal of feminist process, but it was very hard on my tidy little mind. If someone didn't have time, or wasn't comfortable doing her piece alone, I loudly proclaimed the intrinsic value of Feminist Collaboration, and tried to organize a mechanism for getting her multi-layered input and feedback. If I still couldn't get an article written by pulling together a team to work on it, I conducted an interview, and laboriously transcribed the tape. Then I found myself in turmoil over the presence of my voice in articles I hadn't meant to be overtly part of. I felt this made me too controlling, when I had intended to be a behind-the-scenes player, merely setting the scene for ideas to come from the women whose experience and expertise I had called upon.

Still, something felt good about this eminently fluid, varied approach to getting ideas down. I believe that the traditional academic research paper is only one vehicle for sharing even deep and complex concepts. My literacy work has

convinced me of the value of other, less formal and more inclusive forms of communication, whether the information is directed to people with limited reading skills or not.

Editing was trickier still. Having stated very loose parameters in terms of focus, length, etc. for articles, I found it hard to be critical. To avoid having to, I had originally envisioned a collaborative editing process, by which all the contributors would read each other's work. This didn't really happen the way I imagined it, partly because nobody had time to go through the articles in great depth, and partly because I couldn't make it very clear to them what I wanted: specific content comments, copy editing, or general perceptions. Again, I was being very cautious with my demands on people. In the end, the contributors who were able to, took an active role in editing the articles, brainstorming for the International Women's Day Section, and looking over this preface. An outside editor was contracted to review the whole thing.

Having said all this, I invite the readers of this book not only to consider the content and suggestions set out here, but also to think about the process of putting together a feminist document or organizing women within literacy. We, as feminists, may be a long way from creating a perfectly harmonious blend of theory and behaviour, but I hope this book has at least exposed some of the real dilemmas that exist for us as we struggle along, mixing movements and making connections.

What this book is for

The articles in the first section of this book are meant to spark discussion. As you read them, you will note that while there is a range of analyses and arguments, there are many common threads which link them. Each writer or group of writers started with a specific topic - health, poverty, etc. - but several underlying themes reflecting women's experiences in our society came through in every piece. We hope that the words and ideas of the women who contributed to this book will lead other women in literacy programs to think, talk and write about where our movement is now, and how we want to shape it.

The suggestions in the section on International Women's Day activities are intended to spark action. There are all kinds of things women in literacy programs - workers, volunteers and learners together - can do to better understand each other and our common goals as women. There are also many ways to link with other women involved in education, writing and social change. March 8 is a day to celebrate and renew our energy.

How to use this book

This book has been written by literacy workers, and will be most accessible to other women working in programs. However, the following are some suggestions for using this book with women learners:

- ▽ Read the articles and discuss the themes they cover and your interpretation of them with women in the program;
- ▽ Read out loud parts of the articles, perhaps with a women-only group of learners;
- ▽ Photocopy and/or enlarge one part of an article that you think a learner or learners might be interested in and help them to read it;
- ▽ Tape someone reading an article and offer to play the tape to interested learners;
- ▽ Encourage learners (men and women) to write their responses to the articles;
- ▽ Encourage women learners to write or speak about their experiences as women and their suggestions for changes to the program;
- ▽ Read or discuss the International Women's Day suggestions listed in this book, and work with a group of women in the program to generate more ideas and act on one or more of them this March 8!

Note: If you do discuss or read parts of the articles with women in your program, be prepared to deal with sensitive issues that may arise (eg. issues of male violence).

2
Articles

Feminism and Literacy

Naomi Garber, Jenny Horsman and Tracy Westell

Feminism and Literacy: What is the Connection?

The majority of literacy workers, by far, are women. Perhaps this is not surprising, as literacy work is part of the field of education and a "caring" profession, areas of work which have traditionally been seen as women's work. Literacy work has traditionally been volunteer or part-time and is frequently poorly paid and low status. The multiple and complex skills needed to work with literacy learners - who are often poor and face many issues in their lives - are not made visible when literacy work is described. These skills include not only those to help them to improve their reading and writing, but also skills which engage with them in a dialogue about their lives, and support them in a process of becoming active members of the literacy community. As in so many

areas, these "women's skills" are not acknowledged as skills and are consequently awarded little pay or status.[1]

Many women in the literacy field do not see themselves as feminists. But along with numerous other women, the three of us writing this piece, do describe ourselves in that way. All three of us started in the literacy field as volunteer tutors - two of us many years ago. We have chosen to stay in the literacy field as an area of work because of our commitment to social change. We think that literacy work is part of a broader movement which is trying to create a more just society with less inequality and privilege.

Our evolution into feminists and our continued education in feminist thought has been informed by the printed word. We are challenged in our feminist thinking by women learners we work with. Many of these learners would not name themselves feminist. We have wondered whether the issues we want to discuss as feminists, are priorities for women learners. We have seen that their energy and time is often taken up with struggling to make ends meet.

Women learners would not have seen themselves reflected in the women's movement, dominated as it has been by women like us, middle-class, white, and highly educated. In the women's movement those of us who are middle class have been urged by working class women to become aware of issues of class and acknowledge the exclusion of working class women from the women's movement. Those of us who are white have been challenged by women of colour to explore our racism, those of us who do not have physical disabilities have been encouraged to be aware of our ablism, and those of us who are heterosexual have been made aware of our heterosexism and homophobia. But the struggles still continue and many women do not yet see it as their movement. Women with limited literacy skills have been excluded from the feminist debate because so much of the discussion about feminism is carried on in print - frequently academic writing for which much experience with print is needed. Few women learning in literacy programs have been given the opportunity to engage in the debate. Slowly, the educational privilege that we three have is being challenged by our desire to see feminism reflected more strongly in the work we do.

For the writers of this article feminism means a political commitment to end the oppression of women[2]. We also see it as part of the struggle to end classist and racist oppression. (Sexist oppression cannot be separated from classist and racist oppression any more than a woman can separate out her sex from her race and class, they are all integrated to make up who we are[3]) We think poor, illiterate, working class women should be central to feminist struggles for change. As feminists working in literacy we have a responsibility to help feminist movements to account for and learn from poor, working class and educationally deprived women - to bring women in literacy programs to the centre of feminism. In literacy programs working class women write about their lives. This writing is only being read by people in literacy programs; in particular, feminists are not reading these books. These books are a way to bring the voices of working class women into the feminist movement.

Feminist education has long been the domain of "women's studies" courses in universities. As Bell Hooks says, "There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few."[4] This is not to say that feminist academic work is not important or that education for those who are privileged to attend universities is not essential (especially in light of the sexism rampant on university campuses in Canada), but rather that there must be a feminist education agenda in all places that educate women. As places that educate women, what kind of a feminist education agenda do literacy programs have? In this paper, we want to explore feminist agendas for literacy and look at some possibilities for change.

We do not seek, in this paper, to speak as authorities on feminism and literacy, but to talk about our experiences of and ideas on, literacy, in light of our feminism. We hope to encourage discussion and to challenge our ideas and practice; ultimately we hope explorations of feminism and literacy will help to develop a better, more vital literacy practice which will serve women better and enhance the possibilities for social change.

Learner-centred and Woman-positive

Many community literacy programs have espoused the importance of acknowledging women's strengths, and recognizing the complexity of

women's lives. Education and literacy programming which affirms and emphasizes women's strengths, issues and particular needs is "woman-positive"[3]. Woman-positive programming and eduction is what is called for by a feminist agenda.

The desire to acknowledge that learners are adults and to place the realities of their lives and their interests at the heart of the learning process contributed to the development of the philosophy of learner-centred education. This approach has become one of the central tenets of literacy work. We want to suggest that as it is now espoused and practised in many literacy programs, it is a major barrier to a feminist agenda in literacy. Learner-centred has come to imply, in many programs, a neutrality of learning. This has come about through encapsulating learner-centred as "the learner should be able to learn whatever she or he wants".

Part of the problem seems to be the conflict between methodology and curriculum. Learner-centred education or teaching is a methodology, a way of teaching. It recognizes that people learn differently and that there is no one way or best way to learn. Being learner-centred means that learning happens in a way that is appropriate for each learner. The learner-centred method also has a curriculum component. A learner-centred curriculum is not only how, but "what the learner wants to learn". Being learner-centred means the learner selects the content as opposed to following a pre-arranged curriculum. But, in its most crude form, learner-centred education calls for asking learners what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. An image that comes to mind is the new tutor-learner pair who walk up to the bookshelves and the tutor asks "what do you want to read?" The covers of the books do not give enough of a clue to make a real choice. Without new input, any learners' "choices" are likely to be selected from within what they expect to happen in education. Learners may expect to endlessly learn the alphabet, or redo grade school spelling books, because that is what students are "supposed" to do in school. If we simply give learners "what they want", in that crude formulation, we may just be preserving the status quo. Presenting options for better choices is one of the things we should be doing. No one can make good choices if they do not know what the options are. Presenting "alternative" choices is very important because ideas, like feminism, which are outside the mainstream, are rarely available to people with limited reading skills.

The question we ask ourselves is: is a learner-centred curriculum at odds with a woman-positive or feminist curriculum? We suggest that when learner-centred is interpreted to mean the learner simply selecting the curriculum, with little or no input from the tutor or facilitator to broaden options and possibilities, then woman-positive and learner-centred are at odds. A woman-positive education has content, has a point of view. But, learner-centred education has, as we have seen, content or point of view, too. Unfortunately that content is usually the content of the mainstream thought because it is most pervasive and is not labelled (e.g. "the white, middle class, male perspective") and is therefore seen as neutral, unbiased and true. But mainstream thought does have a bias and that bias is neither woman-positive nor feminist. When we seek to do simply what the learner "wants" we are ignoring the powerful influences of mainstream thought and our own role, which inevitably shape the "choices" a learner makes.

These ideas are not new. They are embedded in another important guiding principle in literacy: **"no education is neutral"**. Hiding behind an unbiased conception of learner-centred can be a way to forget this other principle. We hear people saying "you cannot impose a feminist agenda, you cannot impose a feminist curriculum on learners because that is not learner-centred." And indeed, we cannot impose it. But, as feminists, it is more in keeping with a rich interpretation of learner-centred (which keeps in mind that no education is neutral) to recognize our interests, to call them out and make them explicit. A woman-positive approach and content should be put out there, for learners to challenge. If we pretend to give learners what they want without recognizing what we want - what our goals are - we are not being true to the heart of learner-centred programming. At the heart of learner-centred education should be:

- recognizing,and respecting learners as adults;
- recognizing and valuing learners' experiences; and
- recognizing that no education is neutral.

If we recognize learners as adults we will be prepared to dialogue with them and acknowledge our own viewpoints. We will recognize that we cannot teach

the skills of literacy devoid of content. All choice of content is political. To exclude a feminist agenda is just as political as to include it.

Language Experience and Telling Our Stories

The language experience story is another aspect of literacy practice which we might question from a feminist perspective. The telling of stories has become a central method through which learners create their own curriculum and read their own language. Some literacy programs have published these stories, so that materials which represent the lives of women in literacy programs are available for other learners to read[4]. Such materials offer an alternative to those which show women in stereotypical ways and in lifestyles that do not reflect the realities of working class women's lives. When we seek a feminist agenda in literacy programs, we can celebrate that literacy programs have made working class women's writing available to be read, but we must also question what has been achieved.

We can only start the process of examining this practice here by offering some introductory questions. Although excellent individual accounts of women's lives have been published, is this writing used in programs in ways which help women see commonalities and differences with each other, so that they can see possibilities for change? Have we focused on autobiographical writing at the expense of other genres of writing? Have learners been limited in what they are able to say because books are kept short and easy to read? Does the autobiographical form, and chronology of the book, encourage learners to give a particular type of account of their lives and freeze them as a "literacy learner"? We have to ask ourselves whether the publishing of women's writing could become a more powerful tool for furthering a feminist agenda. In many literacy programs workers have tried to provide a place that supports challenging the status quo and does not place women back into the life traditionally expected of them. When feminists in literacy programs apply a critical feminist eye to our programs we will want to begin to question all aspects and reassess their possibilities and limitations.

Women's Groups

Thinking about a feminist agenda has led us not only to look broadly at literacy work and key current philosophies of literacy programming, but also to look at some of the ways in which feminism has influenced some literacy programs and might influence more.

One aspect of programming with an explicit feminist agenda has been "women's groups". A few literacy programs have set up women's groups. These groups seem to have been motivated by feminist literacy workers who were uneasy with the silencing women learners were experiencing in groups where men and women were working together. The formation of these groups drew, perhaps, from the feminist experience of women-only consciousness-raising groups.

These groups open up the possibility for discussion about women's experience of violence, of childhood, of being labelled mentally handicapped and sterilized[8].

Women's groups, both in and out of literacy, are often assumed to be safe places for women to speak out, but not all women find them so. As an example, in a group which two of us led, the women were of different races, abilities and ages and their experiences were very different. They seemed to find their differences more striking than any commonality of being women. These differences were perhaps what often made it hard to find common ground between the women. Ablism and racism created many barriers. Women in this group, perhaps because they are used to being devalued as "illiterates", looked to the facilitator rather than the other group members for much of their support. This limited the possibilities for the formation of a supportive group and pushed the limits of the facilitator's energies.

We need more discussion and exchange of ideas to learn how not, on the one hand, to make our facilitators' voices so loud as to drown out the learners' voices, and, on the other, to push these groups so that they do not become places which serve only to reinforce the way we, as women, traditionally see ourselves. We must develop and encourage woman-positive training for literacy workers and facilitators and create woman-positive curriculum for literacy programs.

Issues of Women's Access to Programs

Many women are not able to participate in programs because of the lack of time to take on one more thing. One woman, who was in a program but not the new women's group, was asked whether she was interested in the group. She said yes she would love to go to it, but was working in the days so could not attend. When asked if she could attend if it were in the evening she said she would not be able to because she was a single parent and needed every minute of her evening to cope with all the household chores and to have time with her children. Her story reminds us about the difficulty many women have in finding the time to focus on their own learning. Women with husbands or boyfriends may encounter further barriers of their male hostility. Although childcare and flexible programming might help to make a program more accessible, there are many aspects of women's lives which limit the time they have available for themselves and for their own education and prevent them from getting to a program at all. We need to acknowledge these barriers and develop a broad range of alternative programming.

Some of the barriers which limit women's access to programs include:

- **Street Violence:** Many women feel unable to go out at night, particularly elderly women, because they feel unsafe on the streets.

- **Harassment:** Some women have been harassed by men in their program. They feel uncomfortable with the way men tease them. Women have been harassed and attacked at home by men they have met in the program.

- **Transportation:** Many women would be able to attend programs if they had a safe and less time-consuming way of getting to programs. So far, funding has been unavailable to pay for taxis or provide a car or mini-bus to pick women up.

- **Childcare:** For women working in literacy, with many more advantages than the women attending programs, childcare is often an issue. For poor and/or isolated women with children wanting to attend any sort of community or educational program, childcare is **always** an issue.

- **Programming Schedules:** Programs are beginning to realize that the program schedules that are convenient to volunteers and literacy workers are often not the best times for learners to attend programs. Flexible scheduling is essential to women who may have complicated family and work demands on their time.

What have we done and what can we do about these issues? Perhaps the most complex are the issues of safety in the program. We have been uncomfortable with excluding men who harass women from the programs, but in the extreme cases we have done this. In the more subtle situations we have often failed to act, feeling uncomfortable, ourselves, perhaps, with the way a man in the program is speaking to a woman, but wary about imposing our feminism on the woman or the program in general. These situations expose issues of power. As staff we do not want to abuse our power and authority but we also have a responsibility to make our programs safe and accessible to women.

Recently we have heard of programs creating processes to address these issues, for example sexual harassment policies. In one case of a man teasing and bothering a woman, both people were brought together so that the man could hear from the woman - with a staff member and someone else from the program present to support her - how she felt about his behaviour. This process ended with an agreement about how the man would act in future, which both people composed together and signed. This helped the woman to move from being a passive victim to asserting her right to feel safe and helped the man to learn how his behaviour was interpreted by the woman and to acknowledge the need to change it. But, we feel clear that a woman can not be asked to confront a man who has been harassing her in a more dangerous way. Finding the line where the two people can be asked to speak together is not always clear-cut. It is important to find approaches which allow the person accused of harassment and the learner or staff member complaining to feel heard.

A very practical beginning to tearing down the barriers to women's access to literacy programs is to start paying attention to, and analyzing the patterns of, learner's attendance. One way to do this is to note down for each day, week or month: the number of men who attend your programs and the number of women; how many women; when women or men are more likely to attend; what qualities the programs have that attract more women; who takes

advantage of one-to-one tutoring and at what times; how long men and women stay in the program and why they leave; what the dynamics of the groups are and who talks the most or the least; what age group are the women who attend; what are the family situations of the women who attend.

Sometimes the voices of women in our programs are so quiet that we do not hear what they are saying. We must listen closely to hear the small voice of protest or the tentative complaint. We must hear the silence of women who are afraid to speak out.

Women Talking about Violence in their Lives

Frequently, the issues that are raised when women do begin to speak out, especially when they talk together in women's groups, are issues of violence. It is important that there are safe spaces for this to happen, but as literacy workers we may feel worried that we are unable to cope with such revelations. Or we may, in our attempts to make a space for such talk to occur, risk opening up material that women find too painful to confront. As women who are literacy workers, we may not feel ready to deal with painful stories which may be revealed. Either it may be too close to experiences we have had which we have not yet dealt with, or it is remote from us and we don't know how to react. We may feel ambivalent about our own role. Too often, we think that we must be the rescuer, must change the situation for the learners and then, we feel inadequate because we cannot do so.

When we listen to learners' accounts that they have not told before, we step into an unknown area, where the relationship of trust that can develop is precious, but also demanding, and far beyond the limits of the literacy interaction. We step into an area where there are no rules and we do not know how to act. Just as with a friend, we might think the learner should seek help from professional therapists or counsellors, but if she doesn't want to do that, we may feel responsible and burdened.

We need to explore ways of working collaboratively with women working with women who have been abused, for example, with women working as

counsellors in women's shelters, or feminist therapists, so that we can learn from their experience how to deal sensitively, not only with the issues, but also with the relationships which develop. This could mean anything from talking with these women, to holding workshops on issues such as 'women and violence' or 'boundaries between women counselling and women being counselled' to rethinking and reorganizing the ways and places that literacy happens. Perhaps this contact between movements would mean women in shelters would begin to write their stories and women in literacy programs would begin to find ways to deal with the violence in their lives.

The Voice of the Feminist Literacy Worker

Taking a feminist perspective also suggests that we must look at our work as women who are literacy workers and volunteers. In community literacy programs, both male and female workers have sought to create a different relationship with learners from the traditional teacher - student or social worker - client relationships. Yet we have been unclear about the nature of this more equal relationship and many of us have had difficulties setting boundaries. We haven't always been good at acknowledging the power differences that remain in the relationship. As women and feminists we have been particularly likely to get caught in the morass of this "different" relationship, because, as women, we have learnt to be good at caring and bad at setting boundaries. As feminist activists, we seek some sort of solidarity across class and race differences, which certainly doesn't fit into the professional mode. We want to acknowledge the shared pain as women in the world, who experience violence in so many dimensions, we want to support other women in their attempts to claim their own worth and to say "no more" to male violence. But, it is hard to know how best to offer that support and harder still to claim a space for ourselves, to find the limits of our responsibility to the learner, and be responsible also to ourselves, acknowledging our own needs and limits.

When women have helped learners tell their stories, have we silenced our own voices and actions as literacy workers? There are ways in which we make the enabling role we play invisible, and disguise the strength of the editorial tasks we carry out. We speak a lot in literacy programs about the importance of

learners speaking out, but as literacy workers it is rare for us to speak about our own reality. As literacy workers (and as feminists) we, too, must "dare to tell the truth about our lives"[9]. We have supported learners to create accounts of their lives, but have we questioned the role we play as literacy workers in shaping this account and making it an acceptable form for a book, or in selecting which accounts are appropriate to be published? In any writing, others help to shape the writing, (take for example those who read this piece to help us clarify our ideas) and publishers always make choices about what they will publish. But, in literacy programs, with our stress on drawing out learners' voices, we have not made these roles visible. We are not telling our own stories.

Feminist Workplaces

In community based literacy programs we have created collectives and alternative working processes for ourselves as workers. We can argue whether the introduction of collectives has been because of the influence of feminism in literacy and even whether they are particularly widespread. But, in some of the programs where they have been used, a few workers are asking questions about what they have achieved or failed to achieve. We have created staff collectives that exclude the voice of learners and so preserve the hierarchy in programs. We have also created organizational structures which have studiously ignored the hierarchy of a traditional board/staff/participant model. We should be trying to create collectives which give an equal voice to all the members of the literacy program community. We should also be using well-documented feminist evaluation and research techniques to ensure the effectiveness of our programs.

Many women workers in the literacy field are overworked and underpaid. The work is low status. Many women put in a lot of time on a "volunteer" basis. For some, this may be an acceptable way to participate in the community, others would prefer to be paid for this work[10]. Many of us have ignored those problems because we are committed to the field and are always aware of how well off we are in comparison with learners.

More recently, some feminists have challenged this status quo. They have argued that as feminists we have a responsibility to seek better pay, working

conditions and benefits, to assert the value of our skills, the importance of literacy work and to make the field a viable work area for working class women, women of colour, single mothers, older women or any women who don't have the luxury of putting in extra time and working for inadequate pay. If we want to make the work more viable for a variety of people to take on, we are left with questions about how we can achieve these changes. This is especially difficult if we don't want to buy in to traditional notions of skill and traditional forms of training.

This is Only a Beginning...

As feminists in the literacy field we need to begin to ask many more questions. We need to examine the strategies we have tried which have opened up possibilities, but which also have limitations. We need to examine our practice more fully for a feminist agenda, so that we can build new visions for literacy work together. We need to make the experiences of poor, oppressed women accessible to well-educated women and the voices of well-educated women accessible to women learners. As feminists, we must be prepared to examine our own privilege and acknowledge it. We must continue to work to affirm the different identities of women and common cause of overcoming sexist oppression. Hooks says:

> ...we have all (irrespective of our race, sex or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system. We all need to make a conscious break with the system. Some of us make the break sooner than others. The compassion we extend to ourselves, the recognition that our change in consciousness and action has been a process, must characterize our approach to those individuals who are politically unconscious. We cannot motivate them to join feminist struggle by asserting a political superiority that makes the movement just another oppressive hierarchy.[11]

In this paper we have talked about feminism and literacy practice, with a particular focus on issues related to literacy programs. While we have asked people to be challenged and to think about the ideas in this paper, we hope we have offered useful suggestions for incorporating feminist thinking into

programs. However, we don't mean to suggest that a feminist education agenda will solve all of the problems that we have discussed in this paper. Many of these problems will not be solved until there are profound changes in the world we live in. A commitment to feminism in literacy means working for those larger changes.

We are reminded by the Montreal massacre of fourteen women that the feminist struggle is not a safe one. Many times in the year that has passed since the massacre, we have been aware of the violence that daily terrorizes women in our society. We cannot insist that all women speak out as advocates of feminism; many women would jeopardize their physical and emotional safety by doing so. But there is a message in the silence, too. We must listen to the silence and the words of women who are literacy workers and learners, in order to develop a feminist vision of literacy practice. We must incorporate feminist curriculums in literacy programs, and state clearly our feminist education agenda.

Acknowledgements:
Thanks to those people who have read drafts and given critical comments, especially Harold Alden, Arthur Bull, Guy Ewing, Helen Gribble and Anne Moore.

Endnotes

1 The work of Jane Gaskell explores, in relation to secretarial work, the way in which "skills" become recognized. See "Conceptions of Skill and the Work of Women: Some Historical and Political Issues" in *Atlantis*, Vol. 8 (2) p. 11-25.

2 Hooks, Bell, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre, Boston: South End Press, 1984, p. 24-25.

3 As Dionne Brand criticises a question that suggested she could decide to be a woman or Black: "As if there were a moment that I wasn't a woman and a moment that I wasn't Black, as if there were a moment that she wasn't white." Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender, Eds. Scheier, Sheard and Wachtel, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990.

[4] Hooks, p. 112.

[5] The term "woman-positive" is being used by Betty Ann Lloyd in her work on women and literacy for the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women. For more information on the research contact CCLOW at 47 Main St., Toronto, M4E 2V6, 416-699-1909.

[6] Stories such as the following are published accounts of women's lives: "Eleventh Child" by Louise Tunstead, "I've Come a Long Way" by Marguerite Godbout, "Lonely Child" by Linda Beaupré, all published by East End Literacy Press and available from Dominie Press; "My Story" by Olive Bernard and "She's Speaking Out" by Janet Ryan, published by Parkdale Press and available from Parkdale Project Read.

[7] Elaine Gaber-Katz' unpublished article "The Use of Story in Critical Literacy" is an excellent exploration of how and why we use story in literacy programs. This article is available at the Ontario Literacy Resource Centre in Toronto, 416-393-7162.

[8] Several interesting books have been written in these groups, such as "I Call it the Curse" and "My Name is Rose" at East End Literacy.

[9] Munro, Alice. Quoted by Olivia Ward in an interview which appeared in *The Toronto Star* on May 6, 1979.

[10] A discussion of the contradictions between volunteer work as unpaid and undervalued women's work and the community based value put on volunteering is beyond the scope of this article.
For a discussion on voluntarism and literacy see: John MacLaughlin, "Feel Good Literacy", *Literacy on the Move* (OLC Newsletter, November 1990, p. 15-17.
Anne Moore and Tracy Westell, "Voluntarism in Community Based Literacy", Adult Literacy Perspectives, Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc., 1989.

[11] Hooks, p. 161-162.

Jenny Horsman is a freelance literacy worker who divides her time between Toronto and a farm in Nova Scotia. She is the author of Something in my Mind Besides the Everyday: Women and Literacy.

Naomi Garber is Project Co-ordinator for the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, and a volunteer tutor at Parkdale Project Read.

Tracy Westell is Public Education Co-ordinator for the Ontario Literacy Coalition. She worked for 4 ½ years at Parkdale Project Read, a community-based literacy program in Toronto.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Looking at "Ism's": Visible Minority Women and Literacy

An Interview with Nancy Simms

The questions and themes raised in this interview are based, in part, on discussions with Pramila Aggarwal and Christine Almeida.

Mary: There is confusion between ESL and literacy that is based on a two-way kind of prejudice. One misconception is that literacy is about teaching immigrants. Some people adopt this idea, because they don't acknowledge literacy as a "home grown" problem. Others want literacy to be a Canadian (meaning white) problem, because they don't see why basic education programming should be offered to people they consider immigrants. They are willing to invest resources into people they perceive to be "of this place". Both kinds of prejudice reflect a blame-the-victim mentality. Can you comment on how different kinds of programs serve or are seen to serve different groups of people?

Nancy: Every time I hear the word immigrant, I remind people that all people except First Nation Peoples are immigrants. In tutor trainings at Jane Finch Literacy House, we ask the white Canadians who are normally the volunteer tutors to trace back their ancestors - when they came and why. This is just to equalize... At Jane Finch, we use this word "immigrant" very widely.

When we talk about ESL/literacy, sometimes it's amusing because it says English, but whose English? A Jamaican women who speaks the Jamaican English language would also need English as a Second Language. Politically, what is said is that any other English besides Canadian English is not English.

What I find interesting when we talk about ESL/literacy, which means basic level literacy for people who cannot read in their own language, is that it does not fit into any category - and this is a country that uses categories. Many people who have dropped out of ESL programs come to us, mainly non-whites, and they speak of a lot of racism in the programs, an immense amount of classism, and just a lack of sensitivity. They feel safer coming into a visible immigrant population which they deem as being also marginalized the way they have been marginalized, and that's where they want to work. It's a struggle for us, because there are people who would not go anywhere else, but we are not mandated to meet their needs.

When a Guyanese woman comes into the program, for example, and she speaks her language, a valid English, she can be accepted as a literacy person, but not for English as a Second Language. Some of the methods of ESL which would be appropriate for her are not being used in the so-called straight literacy programs, so there is a gap. The definitions have to open up, because it is Canadian English as a Second Language, but we don't offer it as such.

Mary: What are some of the stereotypes around some of these categories we use, such as ESL learner, literacy learner, immigrant, visible minority, and what do you do to try to break those down?

Nancy: Jane Finch attracts a lot of newer immigrants from various countries. Most of the volunteers are white. We do exercises to put people's stereotypes on the table, because once stereotypes are voiced, you can reconstruct them. When they are silent, held in, there is nothing you can do with them. What I find lacking in even OLC's pamphlets is that the statistics about illiteracy don't focus on **why**, for example, First Nation Peoples make up a large proportion of the undereducated adults. By not saying **why**, it plays into the myth that First Nations people don't want to read and write, or are lazy.

We need to link the imperialist, colonialist, patriarchal values of Canada to the statistics and expose Canada's role in (perpetuating illiteracy) in other countries. Most Canadians don't know that slavery existed in Canada, so we highlight that at Jane Finch. And we talk about the contributions of various ethnic groups to Canada to combat racism by omission. It is a very painful training program, because we are talking about shifting major paradigms. It is tough work, but we don't see it happening any other way. Most of our tutors are white and this is a white dominant country. We don't see tutors educating with respect unless they validate the contribution of groups, such as Blacks, to Canada.

First they have to look at their own "isms". That's painful, because if you are a volunteer, you are a wonderful, good person. They love people, but the people in South Africa will tell you the same thing, yet they are victimizing oppressed Blacks. My background with the women's movement has helped me facilitate a group so people can start looking inside themselves. All of our tutors and learners take part in anti-racist training sessions. They examine some of the subtle forms of racism. The learners do a lot of educating about what it feels like to hear "my dear" in a very paternalistic way. At the first tutor/learner meeting, the tutors are really nervous, not because they think they don't know how to tutor, but because they are really sensitive to how they might be perpetuating racism and classism and homophobia.

Mary: Visible minority is equated with immigrant virtually all the time. There are plenty of reasons for this: racism in the school system, the denial of the history of visible minority Canadians, particularly Canadian Blacks. You raised the question of who is an immigrant. It seems like the answer across the board is: people we can recognize. This leads to the question, what colour are literacy programs?

Nancy: Literacy programs are all colours. There is a new group of young white learners coming forward. Just this fall, I had a white woman and her daughter come into the program. The daughter has serious truancy problems, has worked the street, etc. She could not cope with the school system. Now, when people think of literacy programs, they think of non-whites. I don't see people convinced of literacy problems among whites. Certainly, most Black people are shocked when they meet a white person who can't read and write.

What the system is doing is focusing on the drop out rate of Black kids. I would say that for every 4 Black children who drop out, so do 2 or 3 white children. You have a class system here of poor white children that aren't making it. They have also internalized racism and the "isms" around them, so they don't see literacy as their problem. Particularly at a program like Jane Finch, they walk in and its predominantly Black, and they ask, "Is this my space?".

Mary: It's interesting to hear you say that. I have a problem with something I feel the literacy movement has done to gain the support of the decision makers, and that is to present literacy as the hidden problem of mainstream, white Canada. I wonder how successful that attempt to push literacy as your neighbour's issue or your nephew's issue has been, but I feel we have gone overboard in trying to get people to invest in literacy by buying into the shock value of white illiteracy.

Nancy: When you read beyond the statistics, you see the illiteracy among First Nations people. It almost never comes to light. Just like the situation with white kids who drop out. That is not being addressed. For me, we have to look at the data more critically. Canada focuses on little pockets, making it either a First Nations issue, or other people's issue.

Mary: Could you talk about the specific experiences of women in your program?

Nancy: The ratio is about 60 - 40. Of course, the basic issue is poverty. There is a lot of sexual harassment, rape. In any week, I'll have some disclosure of rape, whether date rape or by an employer in a domestic situation... I have a background in working with incest survivors. On any one night if we're talking and reading about incest, you might have 3 or 4 disclosures from women who didn't know it wasn't normal, it is a crime. Another problem is parenting. Many of these women have children in the mother country, so they have a lot of isolation, loneliness and guilt. They have come here to get out of poverty; they still live in poverty, but they send home $50 a week. There are a lot of immigration issues.

Racism is rampant. Any day that you wake up as a non-white person, it happens. You can only call it if you know it. What we can try to do in programs is give women the words to name these happenings. We can give a woman who has been sexually harassed on the job the word and the ability to manipulate the word, and the skills to protect herself. Problems arise when the woman is not in Canada "legally". How do we protect her? Immigration issues play into women's oppression.

Mary: You talked about the kinds of disclosure you get in your program. It is a major issue for women working in literacy to deal with information they may not be skilled or ready to cope with, or able to help with for a number of reasons. How do you manage this?

Nancy: We are connected to a lot of other agencies. But I want to point out that, in my experience, 1 in 3 women are sexually assaulted (i.e. experience verbal or physical harassment, etc., right on up to rape) on a daily basis. That means female tutors also. When a learner is disclosing to a tutor who is herself a survivor, it means putting the safety measures in place. It means teaching her the skills so that she doesn't invalidate what the woman is saying in her pain.

Mary: How can that situation where a learner and her tutor find they share the same experience be empowering and helpful to them, rather than more painful?

Nancy: That's a long process. Unless you yourself have done your healing work on your own survival as a victim of abuse, there is no way you can be a healing partner. If I note that there is a lot of resistance to discussing an issue, I probe a bit to find out what stuff is happening for the woman, and definitely push for her to get therapy. The healing process is long-term, not immediate. If two women share their experiences before that healing work is done, all that happens in that relationship is contamination. The learner needs you to hear her, she doesn't need to hear your pain. The tutor can validate and decrease the learner's sense of alienation by referring to the statistics. The tutor should only disclose to the learner if she herself is in a safe space.

Mary: In programs, the disclosure is usually one way, which isn't always comfortable.

Nancy: But it will be, and its not necessarily bad. We don't want the tutor's memories flooding back to her while somebody's disclosing. She'll leave the learner in crisis. You need to be in a safe space yourself before you can move the woman further. We make sure there isn't just one tutor doing a group. And with the one-to-one pairs, if that's the evening when they are going to be doing a lesson on that theme, I'll be there to ensure some safety. We're also looking at forming a women's support group for incest survivors, and other caucuses.

Mary: Your points about how the lines do and don't blend between women literacy workers and women learners leads to the question of visible minority women doing literacy work. There are assumptions about literacy workers just like there are about learners. For example, it is expected that ESL/literacy workers, and boards too, will be white. Can you talk about this issue?

Nancy: We're very fortunate at Jane Finch Literacy House because we have an all-Black Board. What this creates, though, because Black people have not had much access to Boards before, is a gap in the skills of how to function within a Board. There is a lack of knowledge and experience operating as a Board. Those are the struggles we face.

Mary: The structures we create often aren't very accessible.

Nancy: Lack of accessibility is multi-faceted. We can go as basic as where do organizations advertise for Board members - or is it a "buddy" club? With a group of working class people, even taking minutes is a new skill to be learned.

I'm really still disappointed that there are so few Black people at OLC and MTML (Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy).

Mary: What does that mean, in terms of what is not being said, or what is hidden?

Nancy: I see a lot of classist and racist attitudes. It's not to say that both organizations aren't trying, but...these attitudes aren't conscious. As a result, I don't participate much. I feel sometimes like I'm just subjecting myself to abuse.

Mary: Do you sometimes feel that you are expected to be the voice of all non-white women everywhere when you are the only Black person present?

Nancy: I don't feel that way, but I do feel that I have to raise class issues constantly. I feel it is always I who has to raise issues of class and race, and I don't think this should be happening in literacy work at this stage.

Mary: What are some experiences you have faced that reflect ingrained racism and classism?

Nancy: Racism is extremely covert. When you walk into a room as a Black person, instantly your instincts go up. You feel it in your gut. Nobody has to say you are a nigger. That's our survival instinct. We have had to do that in order to be alive today as a race. I have experienced overt racism in literacy work. I have felt ostracized among literacy people in some instances. I am accustomed to being the only Black in an all-white environment, and I have learned to adapt well, but there are still some very unsafe spaces.

Mary: What needs to change to make sure these experiences don't continue?

Nancy: Anti-racist education. I think anti-racist education should be mandatory at MTML and OLC and other organizations on a monthly basis. Money should be made available for this.

Looking back, I'm often surprised that nobody calls racism when they see it, that white women rarely have the guts to say publically, what is happening. I believe that's because of lack of education and safety.

I see literacy as political. An advocacy role is very much a part of it. The issues aren't coming together. We have to talk about how literacy connects with racism, homophobia, classism, sexism.

You just can't stop shouting and fighting. When people first come to Jane Finch, they don't know why I'm talking about class issues and race issues.

Mary: How do their perceptions change by the end of the training?

Nancy: It's really interesting. A number of university students who tutor with us have changed the focus of their studies to anti-racist work. Everyone can learn. Racism can be unlearned. There are some people who get stuck in guilt, and we try and shift them. For many people, this is the first time they are being called on their own privileged behaviours. Who else does it? Few other literacy programs do it as far as I know. There is a lot of resistance. It equalizes in the end, especially if I am able to show how the issues connect and how they all play into literacy. It helps to show privilege and how that impacts on oppression.

It's amazing the lack of non-white people who are engaged in this work.

Mary: Are there some things you like to talk about to begin to wrap up?

Nancy: There are two interconnected things that come to mind. One is poverty. Programs are so poorly funded that childcare is a mishmash if it happens at all. I can't help but wonder if we, as a literacy community, are doing enough to ensure that programs can provide childcare. My own personal dilemma is when I have to say to a woman, we don't have childcare, so you can't be part of the program.

We have to cut back on childcare because of insufficient funds, and another area we cut back on is transportation. I know what it's like not to have milk for my child. Do I buy bus tickets and not milk for my child's lunch at school? These are real base line issues.

Mary: From an advocacy point of view, what needs to happen?

Nancy: I don't know how much fervour there is in the community. I don't know how much knocking on doors there is, and saying this is imperative. How could we team together to make sure childcare is provided? Bob Rae says he's interested in literacy. How do we let him prove that? As long as we don't provide these things, we are going to have people who can't read and write. They will continue being oppressed and disenfranchised.

I sense a passivity. I don't hear any urgency. I don't see the tempo we have in the women's movement, for example to have abusive men charged. I feel the commitment isn't there. As literacy workers, most of us are in the position where our children are taken care of. It goes back to class issues. That's where I am.

***Nancy Simms** is a tutor trainer at Jane-Finch Literacy House in Toronto. She also teaches courses on Women, Race and Class and Intercultural Communication at George Brown College. She is a Black single mother.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Women, Health and Literacy

Mary J. Breen

One serious consequence of not being able to read well is the negative impact it has on the health of women, men, and children. This link between poor health and poor reading skills is best explained in terms of restricted access - restricted access to work and therefore to income, and restricted access to information about health-related issues.

Good reading skills are necessary for a good, well-paid job. Most people who lack good reading skills either work at low-paid, irregular, and frequently dangerous jobs; or they are unemployed and are forced to depend on welfare. Since the income of anyone on welfare in Canada is far below the poverty line, essentials such as safe housing and daily nutritious food have become luxuries the poor cannot afford.

Without adequate good food, safe housing and warm clothes, people get sick. The negative effects of poverty on health are well documented. The poor - both adults and children - are sick more often; they have more years of being sick or disabled; and they live shorter lives. Not only are thousands of families going to bed hungry in unhealthy environments, the stress produced by this day-to-day hardship has a further long-term impact on their health. This combination of factors makes poor people especially vulnerable to illness. People who are poor pay for their poverty with their health.

Women with lower reading skills frequently find themselves poor and unemployed because their options for safe, regular, well-paid work are severely limited. In addition, whether they have partners or not, women are

much more likely to be responsible for the work within their homes, in addition to any outside paid work. This double shift, with little or no relief, is itself the cause of numerous stress-related health problems. And, for a woman whose income comes from paid jobs, income problems frequently arise when she has to miss work or make expensive arrangements to take care of sick children or partners, or even herself. This, of course, is a vicious circle where people are not well enough to earn enough to be well. As a result, the health of Canadian poor women and their children is in jeopardy.

Not only are good reading skills a requirement for well paid work; good reading skills are also essential for accessing the majority of public information about maintaining health and preventing sickness. Since most of this information is written by skilled readers for skilled readers, it is usually quite hard to read. It relies on numerous scientific terms and concepts and illustrations, and the advice it contains is frequently irrelevant for people who are poor. In real terms this means that people with lower reading skills cannot easily read - and therefore cannot access - printed information such as the following important items: immunization information from their children's school, birth control pamphlets, labels on food and vitamins, instructions accompanying a prescription, public information about environmental health issues such as lead in the soil, day care notices, community drop-in centre information, information about the Landlord and Tenant Act, and information about Child Tax Credit refunds. With access to this kind of information so restricted, people are much less able to participate in decisions regarding their own and their family's health.

An additional consequence of poor reading skills is the harm caused by errors in following instructions such as those found on baby formula or cleaning products or over-the-counter drugs, to name but a few. Similarly, a person with reading difficulties may misunderstand warnings about safety equipment at her job, or she may not be able to read the written instructions from her doctor about how to manage her illness. Without good reading skills, people are cut off from information which may be vital to their own health and safety and that of their family.

Because women are much more likely to be responsible for the health and the health care of their families, as well as their own health, women are frequently required to deal with doctors and other professionals in the medical system.

Within this system, it is difficult to obtain the help we need.

Because this medical system tends to ignore the social, cultural, environmental, and economic causes of ill health, doctors often fall into the trap of seeing and treating the symptoms of illnesses in isolation from these larger factors. This can have serious consequences - especially for women. For example, when doctors ignore a woman's poverty and treat only the manifestations of her poverty, the headaches or the ulcer; or the "bad nerves" resulting from abuse while ignoring the signs of abuse, they are not helping the woman to get truly well. They are not helping her make the changes which could move her out of the situation which causes her symptoms.

Not only do doctors often ignore the social causes of illness, they often have difficulty understanding the needs of women, as their training is sexist and elitist. They have even more difficulty understanding the lives of poor women since they have seldom been poor themselves. This, coupled with the fact that doctors frequently speak what amounts to a different language, means that no woman - especially if she is poor or lacks good reading skills - can rely exclusively on doctors to provide her with adequate support and information to make the best decisions about her health.

Despite the inadequacies of the current medical system, some of us have a great advantage. Those of us who are good readers have access to the critiques of both the women's health movement and the consumer health movement. Through their analyses of the medical system, we have access to information which allows us to make much safer, informed choices about our health. Very few women with limited reading skills benefit from this information, research or support.

Obviously, poverty and ill health are critical issues for thousands of Canadians. It is not within the scope of this article to recommend how to restructure the medical system, nor how to realign society's priorities so everyone will have enough money. However, I offer the following points to consider.

1. **Healthy Environments.** Although many poor people have lower reading skills, high reading skills are not the only answer. People who are unemployed may benefit from better reading skills, but they also need money and job opportunities. No one can be healthy until she or he has healthy

environments - safe places to live and work, enough money to purchase what she needs, and healthy ways to relieve stress. Public policy has to reflect the understanding that healthy choices must be the easy choices for everyone. When social conditions improve for women and men and children, their health will improve as well.

2. **Increased Access to Information.** Health care services in Canada are not equally accessible to rich and poor. Poor women with lower reading skills face barriers of class, income, education and gender. Health services must begin to recognize the extent and power of these barriers and work to remove them. For example, communities need community-based health services - located within neighbourhoods and responsive to local needs. One way for health services to be responsive is to not rely exclusively on print materials to teach about health, and instead to find ways to present health information which everyone can access. For information which is most easily conveyed in print, such as the information on food and drug labels, health services could advocate for options such as standardized, simplified labelling.

3. **Literacy Classes.** Although illiteracy is not the only reason for health problems, literacy can be one part of the solution. The needs of women, in terms of literacy, must be assessed and incorporated into every program so that, for example, all literacy classes are held at convenient times in accessible, safe locations with child care provided.

4. **Collaboration.** Collaboration is essential to better understand the links between illiteracy and ill health. Literacy organizations, the medical and public health community, the social service community, business and government need to work together in order to better understand the issue, to raise public awareness, and to identify short and long term strategies. They deserve all of our support.

Mary J. Breen *is the author of Taking Care: A Handbook About Women's Health. She has worked as a teacher of English as an additional language and literacy, and as a community health worker. She lives in Peterborough, where she works as a clear writing consultant.*

Native Women and Literacy

A Letter from Florence Gray

Dear Mary,

In preparing this piece of writing, I experienced an extreme case of writer's block. I had two months to work on it, but words did not come easily.

I think this is a reflection of my belief in the power of literacy's part in the healing process for my people and my community. Literacy involves the whole person; every aspect is dealt with because that is our way. Education, including literacy, is viewed wholistically. Education involves the whole person. We do not fragmentize a person and then try to provide a solution to his/her problem which is revealed by the fragment. Right now, Native communities are going through a healing cycle. We have to heal ourselves and literacy is providing us with a method of doing so.

In literacy, we deal with the learner on a one-to-one basis. In this way, the learner's needs are met. The greatest need for learners is the search for self-esteem. With our loss of culture in the past, our personal identities have also been lost. This loss has been traumatic because now we no longer exist in our own eyes. Literacy programs are enabling Native persons to re-examine themselves and build their own self-esteem on strong foundations. This, in turn, leads to more

participation within their community because now they feel (and justifiably so) they have contributions to make. Thus, Native communities are stronger and better able to exist in the bigger society of Canada.

Literacy is the new driving force within Native communities in Ontario. The realization of how important education is to our survival as a people is forcing more and more Native people to come to terms with their own perceptions of the educational system. Negative past experiences with this system have left many Native people with no desire to pursue their studies. But the increasing trend toward modern technology and new technical language is causing people to re-evaluate their views toward education. This re-evaluation is having a positive outcome. Education is now looked upon as a tool for people to use to further their own personal development as well as their communities' growth. This outlook gives people power over their own lives.

Literacy is an integral part of this new perception. In general, Native persons have had a higher rate of illiteracy than other ethnic groups in Canada. Native literacy programs are being considered as stepping stones to achieving the higher education levels needed today in mainstream society.

With the growth in the need for literacy programs, there are new leaders emerging within Native communities. Native women are in the majority as literacy coordinators, participants and volunteers. These women are dedicated to the advancement of literacy within their communities.

The emergence of women as a driving force is understandable in terms of the traditional roles women have always had in Native culture. Women are the caregivers and healers of Native society. Coordination of and participation in literacy programs are only extensions of these roles. Also, we feel we have to do something to provide a future for our children and grandchildren. Native women do not look for and stop at immediate solutions. Thought and consideration are given to the future because we will continue to exist. As a parent, I will live on in my children and in my children's children, as my grandparents, great-grandparents, etc., live on in me.

Across Ontario, women are dedicating themselves to literacy for these reasons: better lives, better communities and better futures for our children. This dedication does not come without a price. These women are oftentimes the forgotten ones. They appear so strong and so self-reliant at times, that Native communities don't realize that these women, too, are carrying burdens; acting as heads of single-parent families; overcoming personal tragedies, etc.

In trying to write this letter, I wanted to do justice to these women but the words were not coming. At times, things are rough for the different women in literacy, but we rally together and manage to survive. I think that could be the byword for women in literacy, "We survive."

Yours truly,

Florence Gray

Florence Gray *is Co-ordinator of the Niin Sakaan literacy program in Sault Ste. Marie, and Chairperson of the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition. She is an Ojibway Indian from the Garden River First Nations.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Parenting and Literacy

Barbara Flint-Coplan

My immediate response to writing about the effects of illiteracy on women who are parenting was that it is an enormous issue. My initial ideas ranged from "of course there is an impact - women can't read the instructions on medicine bottles or formula tins" to considering the well known link between parents who don't read and children who don't read. But reading is just a small part of the problem, and a surface inspection can result in a blame-the-victim analysis. It does not take into account the experience of women living in a complex, literate world without some important skills or full access to valuable information.

This paper has been divided into three main areas; the first is a brief exploration of the role that illiteracy plays within our society. The second looks at the experience of parenting in a complex, technical and print oriented culture with limited literacy skills. Finally I have suggested some possible solutions which have come from my experiences in working with women.

Illiteracy in our society: why is it still happening?

We live in a patriarchal capitalist social and political system. This system is profit based and depends on the exploitation of some for the benefit of others. Those who have the biggest resource base tend to have control over the economic/political arenas, and tend to be male and white. This is not to say,

however, that all white males are in a position of complete privilege. Access to economic and political power is tightly limited to a few. Despite the sense that there is an attempt to allow access to all, the influence of an elite network of individuals and families has remained fairly intact over the past hundred years.

We all hear stories of individuals who "make it" on their own, but these people are in fact few and far between. They serve as a token of the North American rugged individual who has been able to cross the class barrier through hard work. This ideal puts the responsibility of being poor on the individual. It allows people to get caught up in concepts of motivation and blame, rather than questioning the status quo.

If the political system operates to benefit those with the most power, we must ask what benefit is it to society to have people who are illiterate?

- ▽ It ensures a labour force that can be paid low wages.

- ▽ It can mean limited access to information about rights within the workplace or within society. (It is not surprising to me that businesses are not jumping at the chance to have literacy programs in the workplace. It is also no surprise that corporations are looking at illiteracy in terms of their costs and competition in a "global market".)

- ▽ Politically, illiteracy is disenfranchisement. To be active politically takes education, time and energy.

- ▽ Women who lack certain skills to command our literate, technical society serve a valuable purpose in their role as caregivers (to men and children). Women's reproductive labour is essential to the well-being of the labour market. It also relieves the pressure on society to take responsibility for its children.

- ▽ To be literate is to have a broader range of options, and access to information that can influence your life. In this sense, illiteracy can be seen as a social control which restricts and regulates many women's lives.

Parenting in poverty

A common link among women with children who come into literacy programs, besides their need for some basic skills, is poverty. In 1984, the Transitions report noted that 41% of Family Benefit Recepients were sole support parents.[1] This figure does not take into consideration the working poor, those on Unemployment Insurance and others who are just making ends meet somehow.

Parenting in poverty is very different from parenting with an adequate income. I once heard a male social service worker state that there was no excuse for mothers not to be giving their children the absolute best, considering all that is available for "moms and tots" in almost all communities. This comment reflects many commonly held assumptions about parenting.

- The first assumption is that women should be solely responsible for the care and nuturing of their children.

This automatically places blame on women if their children do not get the "absolute best" or run into problems.

- The second assumption is that there is only one right way to parent.

Parenting is a very subjective activity based on a person's basic beliefs, life experience, and present situation. I feel we must be very careful not to fall into judging another person's parenting from where we stand. (Of course, this does not apply if there are valid concerns for a child's safety and well being.) The style of parenting being promoted by child services involves sophisticated mediation and communication skills and assumes a very strong sense of self-esteem, unlike what earlier generations tended to be raised with.

- The third assumption is that there is access to programs.

Knowing how to access information, services and support is a very complex skill. Even if a women is able to read, she must know where to look for information and how to ask questions of the right people. More importantly, she must be able to afford the programs she feels would support her in her

parenting role. Often the charges seem minimal - a children's program at the library in my community costs $15.00 per child for six weeks. In a family with two or three children and a very low income, $30.00 may be milk for the month. The last access issue is transportation. I live in a community that stretches for 30 kilometers, and the only public transportation is Go transit twice a day. In urban centres, there are many women who can not afford transit as the end of the month nears.

- The final assumption is that parenting or support programs are safe places.

Poverty undermines a person's sense of self and worth. If the program is not sensitive to varying income levels and the effect that parenting in poverty has on individuals, poor women will feel judged and drop out. The content of the program may be totally inappropriate for poor women. The anxiety they feel may not be worth the anticipated benefit. In a culture that still blames individuals for their economic situation, it is very difficult for people to access those services that could help to change their lives.

Poverty also undermines a person's sense of self, and trust in society. Not surprisingly, a mistrust of institutions, agencies, and authority figures is common. If programs look too "good", they arouse suspicion. Based on their experience of other "helping" agencies, women may question what the catch is. They may wonder why workers are so nice, and who they are reporting to.

Poverty and illiteracy result in isolation. The isolation is both physical and emotional. A lack of personal security can cause a closed in feeling, and a need to protect what is sure. For many women the only thing that is sure is their children and their relationship to them.

Where can we go from here?

It would be easy to say that if we teach women to read, their problems and the problems of their children will disappear. However, the barriers that we face as women, and especially as poor women, women of colour, lesbians, parents, are very real. These barriers may not be concrete and they may not always be the

same, but the fact remains that an imbalance exists: literacy issues are entangled in other power issues, and women raising children without community access skills - among them reading and writing - are especially disempowered.

I do not believe that family literacy programs can end the problems of women who parent. There are many wonderful family literacy programs, many of which have taken a step toward woman-positive programming by realizing that the woman must be treated as a whole, not as a role. But the focus of family literacy programs tends to be prevention for the children, achieved by teaching the mothers. This approach falls nicely within the societal norm that keeps responsibility for children on women's shoulders.

Women-centred literacy training, or support groups that have a literacy component, can help women develop the courage to confront some of the barriers they face, and to advocate for themselves and their children. By treating women as total, complete people, we challenge the compartmentalization of women into roles. By beginning to demand funding for women-centred literacy programs, and using feminist curriculum, I hope we can change the experience of women who are presently parenting in poverty.

Endnote

[1] SARC, Transitions, Summary, p. 14.

***Barbara Flint-Coplan** is Co-ordinator of the Georgina Literacy Council, a community-based program on the south shore of Lake Simcoe. She has spent 12 years counselling women who have experienced abuse, rape and incest. She has also run parent support groups, and teaches pre- and post-natal care at Women's College Hospital in Toronto.*

Women, Literacy and Poverty: Making the Connections

An Interview with Wendy Desbrisay

Mary: What are some of the links you began to uncover when you started meeting with people for the literacy and poverty study you are doing?

Wendy: I'd say that there are three major types of connections. One is that people who grow up in poor families have less opportunity to become literate. It seems that the schools don't serve them as well, and make them feel alienated. They tend to drop out sooner, often to work.

Another connection is that when you are illiterate or undereducated, it is hard to get all the services and help that you need to get out of poverty or even to just have a decent quality of life. All the institutions and agencies have roadblocks that stop people who don't know how to read and write very well, or don't know how to jump through all the hoops.

The third thing is that when people are poor, they have a hard time finding their way to literacy programs or to some kind of help. There are all kinds of barriers: transportation, childcare...just getting by. Living on welfare is a full-time job. Survival is enough of a challenge without taking on something else.

Mary: Have you begun to see trends in how poor women fare in terms of accessing literacy programs?

Wendy: Many of the learners I talked to were women whose children had grown up a bit, who wouldn't have been able to go before their kids were in school. Other women I talked to were waiting to go into a program when they get daycare. Their learning had to be worked around caring for their children.

Mary: How do you interpret this situation?

Wendy: What we call "reproductive work" has everything to do with women's poverty. Caring for children has always been considered women's work, and there are two parts to that: it's left to women and it isn't paid, or isn't paid well. If it falls to us to care for children, then it means we spend time outside of the labour force. While you're at home, you're not developing skills that would be marketable in a changing work force. When you do get back in the labour force, you face a ghetto of women's work that hasn't really changed in 10 years. The vast majority of women are still being trained for work in the service industry, teaching ...traditional professions.

It's circular. We do part-time work so we can attend to our childcare duties. Part-time work is often badly paid, and doesn't have any benefits, and the part-time labour force is growing like crazy!

Mary: Reproductive work also tends to include responsibility for children's education, which is how mothers get the blame for passing illiteracy on to their children. What else does it mean?

Wendy: There's all the physical maintenance of the children, plus socialization. It's true that women feel guilt if they're not able to help their kids with their homework. Almost all the women I talked to gave that as a reason for wanting to go back to school. That guilt or feeling of responsibility for how their children "turn out" is one of the heaviest burdens women have to bear.

Mary: Let's talk about the issue of self-esteem, and its effect on literacy.

Wendy: Self-esteem was an issue for everyone I met. All the people felt they weren't valued by society, mainly because of their education. Learning to read and write, they felt, would make a big difference in their confidence.

Mary: Do you think the key point for them was the education alone, or what the education would do for them, for example economically?

Wendy: I don't think the education did much economically for most of the people that I saw. The results of going back to school were much more in the area of how they felt about themselves. Self-esteem is the main issue aside from the political stuff that doesn't have to do with the people... the things about whether there are jobs or not, whether there is access. I'm interested in what class and gender do to people's self-concept.

Mary: How do you see that as different from political?

Wendy: It's not different, but it's outside the people. How many jobs there are isn't changed by somebody going to a literacy program.

I was really struck by the research on literacy and gender done by Heather Jane Robertson. She found that girls thrive in the early grades when the atmosphere is co-operative, not competitive. Girls are rewarded for being good, while boys are rewarded for grappling with ideas.

When poor kids arrive at school, they get the message pretty fast that they're second class. First of all, they find they don't know what other kids already know - what we call readiness, and cultural knowledge. They also get the idea that there are some other kids who aren't like them. They know where they are in the hierarchy as early as kindergarten. This gets reinforced all through school and ties in with the gender kind of socialization.

Things like paying for school pictures, and having the right clothes are really important. One of the things we are talking about is whether school is a hospitable place for poor kids. A lot of kids never feel good enough there.

Mary: What were the common threads among the reasons girls left school?

Wendy: Well, it is estimated that 1/3 of girls who leave school do so because they're pregnant. Lots of the women I talked to left to have babies. I also met lots who dropped out because it just wasn't going anywhere, because they were bored, because they were poor and were able to get some kind of a job

and have their own money. That was more attractive. I met some who were kicked out too.

Mary: How did the women you talked to describe that experience of leaving school because they were pregnant?

Wendy: Most didn't want their kids to do what they did, so that would be an indication of how they feel. It makes me sad, because they blame themselves for a situation that most of us would react the same way to. People feel like they could have tried harder, they could have stuck it through, but when you know all the statistics, you know there wasn't much hope.

Mary: Why is it still the case that women are only in certain fields, that these barriers still exist, that the cycle continues?

Wendy: People are benefiting from the situation the way it is. Let's just sum it up - business doesn't want to pay for reproductive work. We used to say that when you hire a man, you get his wife's labour too, because her work at home makes it possible for him to focus on his job. We're kind of in a funny place with that because women are in the labour force, but still doing that kind of work... the cleaning up, and maintaining people, and not getting paid very much for it. Business doesn't want to pay for justice for women. Women have to abandon their old roles. Who can blame us if we're not able to do that. I find that a very hard thing to let go of your old role and your old identity, because there is a lot of guilt attached to that. That guilt will come at you from your children, from your male partner, from the world.

Mary: What would society look like if women didn't fill this role? Who would be the human maintenance workers?

Wendy: If human maintenance work was paid properly, women and men would choose to do it, and wouldn't be penalized by low pay and burn out. It would become an attractive job. Women and men would have the benefit of labour policies that allow you to do a good job of being a parent at the same time as being a worker. Some countries have those kinds of policies.

Parents should have the right to a work day that coincides with school. You could have a good life in a two parent family if you each worked a little less than full-time. For a single parent, child benefits could bridge the difference. It would be so wonderful for society to build a valuing of reproductive work into everything. All of society would benefit if the care and the growth of the next generation was a major concern in all social policy.

Mary: Also, there wouldn't be that split between what happens at school and what happens at home. Really, intergenerational illiteracy (low literacy skills among the children of non-readers) would be on the road to being solved.

Wendy: If good childcare were available to anyone who chose it, children would get the benefits of a broad exposure to all kinds of things. Parents would have the choice to go to work if they knew their children were well cared for. What happens with poor children is that they are often isolated at home with parents who might not read well. They don't go to museums and all that stuff. I don't want to set that up as an ideal either, but isolation isn't great for anyone.

Mary: What does that isolation mean to women?

Wendy: Undereducated women sometimes have been isolated as children and again as mothers. Going to programs shows them all kinds of things about the world out there. With just a little literacy, one woman I talked to takes the bus, reads maps, belongs to all kinds of clubs. She feels really confident and excited. I'd say 1/4 or 1/3 of the women learners I talked to are involved as volunteers or participants in some kind of group like a women's centre. They are developing their literacy more through that participation than by going to a literacy program. Making some kind of contribution or feeling you're part of something is a powerful way of learning. What starts as self-help ends up as consciousness of issues.

Mary: We talked about how unpaid reproductive work serves the decision-makers in our society and how women's role limits their access to literacy. At the same time we hear all the arguments from business in favour of a literate workforce to be competitive. People talk about how dire a situation it is in terms of intergenerational illiteracy. How can these two arguments co-exist?

Wendy: I guess if we had a clear answer, we'd be able to act better than we have been. I think illiteracy is used as a smokescreen for social injustice and poverty. I think that it depends on your definition of literacy. We hear a lot about what business thinks about it. They're blaming illiterate people for poor productivity and problems with the economy. I just don't believe that. I think that until we have full employment, we can't say illiteracy is affecting the economy. Sure, employers would like workers who know exactly what to do, and do everything the employer wants efficiently. They want workers to have just the right skills and no extra ones, because then they might make trouble. Have you noticed that the Y has programs for people to learn how to be chambermaids? Years ago you didn't need a training program to do that job. You didn't need to be literate. Now you won't be able to get any job unless you've taken the training course for it. That's business' view. I get a terrible picture of people being trained to meet just these needs - like robots almost.

What I call literacy includes reading and writing, but I would hesitate to call people illiterate who, say find out about their political candidates and vote, and know what is going on in their community. I don't know if the "powers" want people who question and who demand. I think that's what literacy is for, personally. That's why I want to work with people on it.

Mary: When literacy programs evaluate the success of people, are we buying into the smokescreen when we look at whether people went on to training programs for menial work, or got jobs? How can we assess things in terms that matter to us?

Wendy: The most important thing is the person. I think we should have ways of helping people define their goals, and then evaluate their own progress. We should put some energy into defining literacy in terms of the learner's own perspective. I'm concerned that the hype about literacy marginalizes groups that society sees as deficient in some way even more. All of a sudden people are talking about your problem. I don't even want to call it a problem, unless people identify it as a problem for themselves. When you hear all that, it just makes you feel dumb. It's more battering of self-esteem.

Mary: In a way the literacy movement has had to prove illiteracy is a problem so that we can get support for what we do. We've ended up buying into stereotypes to make things relevant to the policy makers.

Wendy: We call that "the big table". But we try to talk to people at the tables around here. The real knowledge about issues of literacy is with the learners and the people who work with them.

Mary: Let's talk about the situation now and what we can do to change it.

Wendy: In many parts of Canada, I can tell you that women are living on welfare rates that are totally inadequate. People struggling with that probably wouldn't think of going to school until their life gets a little easier, but if they did go, they wouldn't be able to concentrate.

Mary: What do women need to be able to learn in literacy programs?

Wendy: Childcare is the first hurdle. The hours of programs, again related to childcare, should be the same as the school day. Those are specific to women. All poor people also need their transportation covered. Some programs give out bus tickets or passes. Everything about the program should be free.

Mary: What about the learning environment?

Wendy: In terms of safety, one of the first things women need in any adult education program is to be assured that they already know something. It is really important to focus on what we already know, and that we can think.

Teachers and workers need to show their processes to the women students so that they learn how you work through problems...to demystify the process. Women need a co-operative climate. We're used to helping other people, and we certainly don't like situations where we can benefit at someone else's expense, where there are winners and losers. Often women just give up or derail in competitive situations.

Women come to programs feeling like they haven't done anything in their life. Often they quit school to have a family, and they feel like they've been home with this family not doing anything. All the kinds of skills that it takes to manage a family and to manage on a low budget aren't recognized by them or by anyone. It's really important to help women to see all the skills and strengths and expertise that they have and build on those.

Another thing I have found is that I can't separate my emotions and the things I feel from what I am doing. That's probably a fairly common female thing, to not want to leave your emotions behind when you go to school or work for the day. If you feel you have to put a lid on your feelings, that is unsafe. I would always base literacy work on the things people bring from their personal lives. It's really true in women's lives that the personal is political.

Mary: You were saying that workers need to demystify their processes. Does that mean there is a place for workers to share their personal experiences, and for disclosure to come from both sides?

Wendy: Yes. Working with low income women, I have always felt that as women we have a lot in common. You can choose to pick up on those similarities or you can accentuate differences, for example by the way you dress, the things you talk about, the language you use. When poor women look at a so-called professional woman, they don't think that all they have to do is learn to read and write then after a while they'll be like that. It seems like a huge gap. That's why demystifying those processes by thinking out loud is important. Then the woman can see that that's something she could do. She can even see where you might have missed something. Maybe she could even do it better. It is important to show the work that you do as something that could be done by the other woman that you're working with. There are just some things that she'd need to find out, like any other skill.

Mary: It's just showing the tools... showing that there is nothing magical about this work.

Wendy: That magical idea is something a lot of people feel when they have been outside the middle class. We need poor people to know how to change poverty.

Mary: If you had the opportunity to design a literacy program for the poor women you've talked to, what would be different about it?

Wendy: The first thing that I would do is make sure that there was the time and space for a women's group within the program, whether it's a discussion group or whatever. It doesn't matter how it starts as long as you make a space

where women get together. You have to trust that women will talk about what's important. Out of that you can start to build literacy oriented work. We might have the skills to build some literacy into it, but the content should come from the women. That only comes out when people feel safe and can really talk about what is going on in their heads. We live a lot of our lives without exposing that because we're afraid we're different from everyone else.

I'm really glad that some people are working on materials. It's crucial that what we read we can identify with. A lot of the stuff that's around to read reinforces the oppression that we've internalized. If what you read doesn't talk about life in a way you can relate to, it makes you feel crazy.

Basically, we need to start working on women-positive or feminist materials. On the other hand, poor women might have a different view of things than middle class feminists. It's possible that as we try to create materials for literacy learners, we may miss the mark, but at least we can try. I have faith that as women develop their voice, maybe people who aren't ready to write yet can still feel safe enough to speak. It's a process that involves us all. What I'm concerned about is somebody telling it like it is. And it isn't the same way for everyone. There's this voice that isn't heard. How do poor women feel in front of their teacher, their social worker, all these helping professional women who come into their lives? Do we really know? Is there a barrier between us because we've got something that we're offering to them?

It should be a really important part of our focus to find out where the women are, what they need to learn and how they learn. As a person who went back to school, I know what makes me feel dumb and takes my voice away because I've struggled with that. I want to help other women do that. Sometimes you think you know something and then you go to a meeting and you just can't find your voice.

I'd like to help women be aware of that and to find out how they need to prepare themselves so that they can stay assertive and stay self-confident.

Mary: We are really conscious of learner involvement, but we often do everyone a disservice when we invite learners straight onto a board, or put them in a situation where they are almost guaranteed to have their voice taken

away because they don't have the background knowledge that everyone else is going to have in that situation. What other specific suggestions would you make?

Wendy: Something that just popped into my head is affection. I don't mean everyone has to hug in a literacy program, but the emotional sphere is important in women's lives. The amount of affection is important. People have needs for touch and affection and we can't ignore that. The first thing I'd deal with is people's personal safety and comfort, and then work on building up their inventory of strengths.

I lean toward a popular education kind of approach which means that the curriculum comes from the people. You need a lot of skills not to just say to someone who hasn't had a lot of choices in her life, "Well, what do you want to learn?". You have to have ways of presenting some sort of a menu or using processes that you can trust to bring out people's preferences and their goals and knowledge. And we have to have things to read that we won't be hurt or insulted by.

Mary: There's a focus for beyond 1990!

Wendy: Basically people want friendly workers, they want to go at their own pace, they want understanding and patience. Those are the things people talk about a lot.

Mary: What needs to happen systemically or societally to let these programs happen, and ultimately not to have the pressing need for these programs?

Wendy: First of all, I think in terms of prevention, we have to start with adequate family incomes because from the time that a woman is pregnant, her child is being affected by the quality of her life. There's the whole issue of child poverty.

Schools have to deal with their class bias, and with the sexism that is in the curriculum. It's not just getting rid of sexism. If co-operative environments are better for girls, they're probably better for boys too. So, some kind of work on the school system to make it better for disadvantaged groups, whether they're disadvantaged by race or class or gender is needed.

Teenage pregnancy. Heather Jane Robertson talks about asking teachers if there are condom machines in schools now because of AIDS. Where were these condom machines when it was only girls' futures that were at risk? Teenage pregnancy is a huge problem and it isn't receiving any attention.

Labour force inequities. We need pay equity.

Mary: And also value placed on reproductive work or human maintenance work so that it has appeal to both sexes?

Wendy: Yes. Just one area is childcare. We need a lot more daycare centres with well paid staff, accessible to anyone who needs them. I think we need some kind of help for people who care for children at home. Given that we have subsidized daycare, why can't we get paid to look after our own kids, at least for a certain length of time. Some countries have that.

Women and Poverty Revisited talks about marriage breakdown as one of the biggest reasons for women's poverty, along with lack of childcare and disadvantage in the labour force. It makes it seem that women are one man away from poverty. I don't find it useful or relevant to think of it in that way. I think society should make single parenting viable, which means raising the minimum wage, equal pay for work of equal value, no female job ghettos. You shouldn't have to be married not to be poor. It's always really bugged me that staying home to look after your children if you're married is honourable, and you're a welfare bum if you're not married. It's the very same job description, sanctioned on one hand and condemned on the other.

At this point the taped interview ends, but we went on to talk about our relationship to our work briefly. Wendy is responsible for the NAPO study, and Mary is responsible for this women and literacy project. Both of us felt we were trying to satisfy others whose feedback and "expertise" we had sought. We were conscious of our reluctance to give or receive criticism. We were focused on order, and timelines, and were trying not to make too many demands on other people... to please them. We were careful of how we exposed our vulnerability and confided personal information. Clearly, the lines between "learner" and "worker" blur for us all the time. We have learned gender appropriate behaviour, which, as Wendy says, is very hard to let go of.

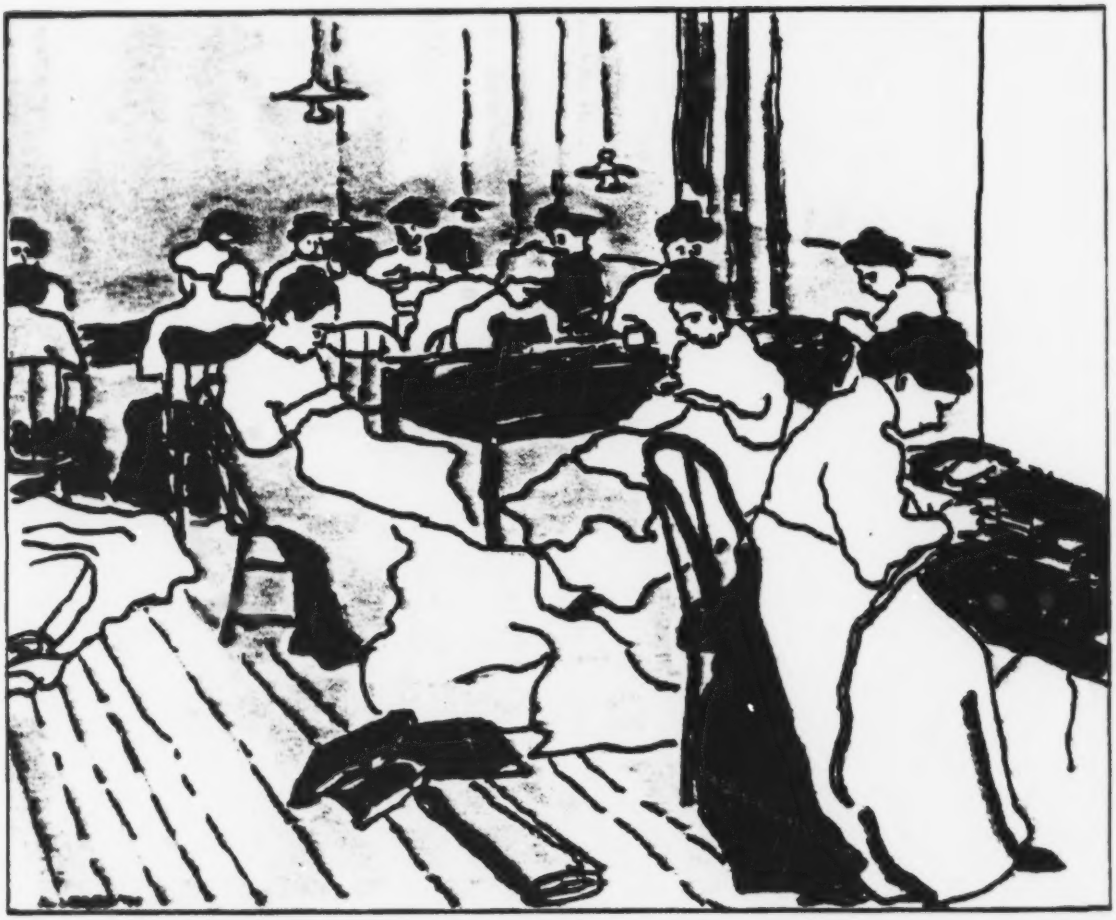
Wendy Desbrisay *is currently working on a study on the relationship between literacy and poverty for the National Anti-Poverty Organization. She regularly works at ALSO (Alternative Learning Styles and Outlooks), a community-based literacy program in Ottawa. Wendy's studies in social work have focused on women and poverty. She has done a range of community work, and was a single parent on social assistance for many years.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Women, Literacy and Action:
A Handbook

Published by
Ontario Literacy Coalition
365 Bloor Street East
Suite #1003
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 3L4
(416) 963-5787

February 1991



Below are just some of the many possible activities women in literacy programs could do to mark International Women's Day:

- ▽ Join your local International Women's Day march, if there is one.
- ▽ Form an IWD committee by linking with women in your community, and organize a march.
- ▽ Organize a women's focus group. It could meet to discuss the themes in this book or other topics of interest to women in the program. Women could get together for one special meeting, or on a regular basis to look at many different issues.

- Have in a speaker from a women's group working in an area of interest or concern to the women in the program. You could contact your local women's centre or shelter, or other community organizations to get names.

- Hold an anti-sexism workshop for the men and women involved in the program, or for men only.

- Organize an anti-racism workshop specifically for the women in the program.

- Have a poster-making session. Invite all the women involved in the program as workers, learners or tutors to get together and make posters which express their feelings and perceptions about being women. Techniques can include painting, drawing, making collages from the print and pictures in magazines, cutting and pasting materials such as plastic, string, wire, buttons, etc. The posters can be mounted on the wall for discussion with other participants in the program.

- Write a book one night. Invite a group of women from literacy programs in your community to a big, accessible space with a photocopier, and get everyone writing - alone, in pairs or in small groups. Some samples of women's writing could be read for inspiration. Topics to write about could include: important women in our lives, barriers we face, challenges we have met, etc. Perhaps an illustrator or photographer would donate her services to provide pictures. When all the writing has been done, some of the participants can help copy all of the pieces in good - using readable handwriting, a typewriter or computer - and the whole lot can be photocopied with pictures, bound, and given to the women to take home.

- Show a film about a woman, or an issue of concern to women in the program. A list of films by the National Film Board's women's studio is available from Pat Hacker, Women's Film Officer, (416) 973-0902.

- Have a display of women's literature (books or stories by and about women), and/or women learners' writing. Parts of this writing could be read, perhaps enlarged or rewritten in clear language, and interpretations discussed. Women could work together on reviews of the writing. They might also choose to write to women authors or their publishers with their thoughts.

- Invite someone from your local Canada Employment Centre to talk about non-traditional jobs for women.

- Contact the Women's Studies Department of a university and organize a get together between some of the students taking courses and the women involved in your program.

- Organize a letter writing campaign around an issue or issues of concern to the women in the program. In Ontario, the Minister in charge of women's issues is the Honourable Anne Swarbrick (MPP Scarborough West). You can write to her at: Queen's Park, 480 University Ave, 2nd Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 1V2.

- Have a songwriting evening. In small groups, pick a theme, then choose a familiar tune and work together to rewrite the words. Each group can teach the other women their song, and everyone can have a sing-along. Or just do the sing-along part by playing women's music, or having someone who can play an instrument lead the group.

- Put on a play. Get a group of women from the program together to work on a skit, with or without words. Choose a theme, and decide on some main points to be brought out through drama. Then assign characters, and have everyone take part in making up the sequence of events, actions and/or dialogue. Present this play to other participants in the program, or other literacy groups in your community.

4
Resources

Groups Involved in Women and Literacy

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW)
47 Main St.
Toronto, Ont.
M4E 2V6
(416) 699-1909

Subscriptions to Women's Education des femmes, a periodical, are available from CCLOW. They have also produced a brochure, called "Let's Talk About Women and Literacy".

International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) Women's Program
720 Bathurst St.
Toronto, Ont.
M5S 2R4
(416) 588-1211

Réseau national d'action éducation femmes
50 rue Vaughan
Ottawa, Ont.
K1M 1X1
(613) 741-9978
This group should be contacted for information on francophone materials.

Materials - General

The following is a listing of some resources on women and literacy which are currently available. This list is not exhaustive, but is meant to be a useful start in researching this issue. Some of these publications provide further bibliographies which will help locate more specific information.

Avebury Research and Consulting Ltd., Decade of Promise: An Assessment of Canadian Women's Status in Education, Training and Employment, Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Toronto, 1986.

Belenky, Mary Field et al. Women's ways of knowing the development of self, voice, and mind. Basic Books, New York.

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Telling Our Stories Our Way, A Guide to Good Canadian Materials for Women Learning to Read, Toronto, 1990.

Canadian Women's Studies/Les cahiers de la femme, Inanna Publications and Education, Vol.9, No. 3/4 on Women and Literacy, Downsview, 1988.

DeCoito, Paula A., Women and Adult Basic Education in Canada: An Exploratory Study, Dorothy MacKeracher, ed., Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Toronto, 1982.

Equality of Access of Women to Literacy, UNESCO, 1970.

Hooks, Bell, "Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda" in From Margin to Centre, South End Press, 1984.

Horsman, Jennifer, Something in my Mind Besides the Everyday, Women and Literacy, Women's Press, Toronto, 1990.

Hughes, Mary and Kennedy, Mary, New Futures, Changing Women's Education, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985.

MacKeracher, Dorothy, Roadblocks to Women's Learning: Issues for Advocacy, Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Toronto, 1982.

Ramdas, Lalita, Illiteracy, Women and Development: Questions and Reflections, Convergence, Vol. XVII, No.4, Toronto, 1984.

Ramdas, Lalita, Women and Literacy: A Quest for Justice, Convergence, Vol. XXIII, No.1, Toronto, 1990.

Riria, Jennifer, Co-operating for Literacy, The Perspective of Women, An International Seminar, German Foundation for International Development and International Council for Adult Education, 1983.

Robertson, Heather Jane, *Literacy and Gender: Making the Connections*, Presentation at Literacy and the Schools Conference of Canadian Teachers' Federation, Ottawa, May 1990.

Rockhill, Kathleen, "Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy", British Journal of Sociology of Education, Vol. 8, Number 2, 1987.

Rockhill, Kathleen, "Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing to be SOMEBODY", in Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective by Gaskell, Jane and McLaren, Arlene, Detselig Enterprises, Calgary, 1987.

Voices Rising, *Special Report: Building the Movement - A Women's Leadership Seminar in International Adult Education*, International Council for Adult Education, Toronto, Aug. 1989.

Voices Rising, *The Literacy Issue*, Vol. 4, Number 1, International Council of Adult Education, Toronto, 1990.

Wismer, Susan, Women's Education and Training in Canada: A Policy Analysis, Canadian Congress of Learning Opportunities for Women, Toronto, 1988.

The Women's Kit, Participatory Research Group/International Council of Adult Education Women's Program, Toronto, 1987.

Working Together for Change, Women's Self-help Handbook, The Women's Self-help Network, North Island Women's Services Society, 1984.

Materials - Specific Topics

Barndt, Deborah and Marino Dian, Immigrants Speak Out, Participatory Research Group, Toronto, 1983.

Breen, Mary J., Taking Care, A Handbook About Women's Health, McGraw Hill, Toronto, 1991.

Breen, Mary J. and Catano, Jan, "Can She Read It?", Healthsharing, Vol.8, No. 3 and 4, Toronto, 1988.

Canadian Women's Studies/Les cahiers de la femme, Inanna Publications and Education, Vol.10, No. 2/3 on Native Women (special issue), Downsview, 1989.

Cervinskas, Jenny, Organizing for Health, International Council for Adult Education, Toronto, 1984.

Deble, Isabelle, The School Education of Girls, UNESCO, 1980.

Luttrell, Wendy, "Working-class Women's Ways of Knowing: Effects of Gender, Race and Class" in Sociology of Education, Vol. 62, 1989.

McIntosh, Peggy, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in Peace and Freedom, July/Aug. 1989

Rural Women's Participation in Development, United Nations Development Programme, New York, 1980.

Women, Class and Adult Education, University of Southampton, Dept. of Adult Education, 1981.

Women, Health and Development, Junic/NGO Sub-group on Women and Development, Joint United Nations Information Committee, 1981.

Women's Popular Health Education Resource Guide, The Weave, CUSO - Montreal Women's Health Working Group, 1988.

Women and Poverty Revisited, National Council of Welfare, Ottawa, 1990.

Ontario Literacy Coalition
365 Bloor Street East
Suite #1003
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 3L4
(416) 963-5787

BEST COPY AVAILABLE